

Remarks by County Executive Ike Leggett
Annual Legislative Briefing
The Mental Health Association of Montgomery County
October 31, 2008

- While campaigning for county executive, I heard from many veterans and from the families of those serving in the Middle East regarding their needs and the needs of their loved ones. One of my early priorities in this administration was to consider a variety of services to respond to the needs of veterans of all types, especially those returning from the Middle Eastern conflicts in Iraq and Afghanistan. Several of us have been working on this initiative and progress has occurred. I am grateful to Congressman Van Hollen for recently holding a community forum on the needs of veterans. I learned much at that hearing. I am grateful as well to Gov O'Malley and Lt Gov Brown for their concern and leadership in responding to our veteran's needs.
- As many of you know, I am a veteran of the Vietnam War. **(extemporaneous remarks)**
- I believe that Montgomery County was highly honored by the Congress when it decided that our County would become the home of perhaps the most important and military medical facility in the country. Some have called it the flagship military health facility. I welcome the addition of Walter Reed to Bethesda and the volunteer opportunities it will provide for our citizens to serve and advocate for returning vets especially during their rehabilitation. I can think of no greater cause for which to call our people to action than to summon them to offer their time, talents and love in

welcoming home these brave and sacrificing men and women.

- In order for our community to be ready to respond as more and more vets come to our community, especially in 2011 when the new hospital is completed, I have taken several steps, guided by certain principles. First, we must do all that we can to advocate that veterans coming to our community are able to fully access the federal entitlements due them for their brave service. Second, that our community participation should be broad including non profit, faith based and community service groups, family support groups and the business and educational communities. Third, we must work collaboratively with the administrators of the hospital in planning comprehensive assistance to veterans and their families.
- There are a few steps I have taken to pave the way. **And speaking of paving the way, while I have the attention of esteemed state and federal officials here this morning, I urge that the state and federal governments act to provide the funds critical to the construction of the road improvements needed by this hospital.**
- I proposed and the County Council unanimously enacted legislation to establish a Commission for Veteran's Affairs to advise me and the Council on actions we should take to honor and assist veterans in our County. I will shortly send to my appointments to the Commission to the Council. These appointments will represent veterans of WWII, Korea, Vietnam as well as the current Middle East conflicts. In fact we had so many extraordinary applicants that I decided to expand the Commission and have sent legislation to the Council to add an addition four members to the Commission. The commission will have a full plate of issues to address.

However, I am asking the Commission in particular to consider two items immediately. These are first; to design and sponsor an enhanced annual county celebration of Veteran's Day, and secondly, to suggest an appropriate memorial for those veterans who have made the ultimate sacrifice for our country. **My good friend Mike Subin will by my representative on the Commission.**

- Last year, in an effort to understand the current needs of the nearly 60 thousand veterans who live in Montgomery County and to prepare for the return of troops from the Middle East, the County provided \$47,000 to match funds raised by the Community Foundation of the National Capital Region to study the number of vets in our community along with their needs; to understand the mandated federal and state programs and their capacities; to identify the challenges we will face as we move into this new area; to determine whether there is a role for local communities in serving vets; and finally, whether there is interest and potential for private funding to fill gaps in services to veterans. Having this information has and will continue to be helpful as we plan ahead. There are summaries of the study available here this morning.
- One clear and urgent need which quickly became apparent and required immediate attention is for information and referral for mental health services. This year, even as tight as our budget was, I added an additional \$40,000 to establish a mental health information and referral hotline for veterans. Mental health issues are among the most significant challenges confronting veterans returning from the Middle East. **Sharon (Friedman), thank you and your staff for creating this important service and for sponsoring this informative event today. The telephone referral line will become operational on November 17th.**

- Our study informs us that there are and will be more vets living in this regions. We must have a regional understanding of the needs of vets as well as services available throughout the region. I intend to invite leaders from other Washington area jurisdictions to join me in planning a conference to convene here in Montgomery County next year to provide a forum for better understanding the needs of veterans and their families, opportunities for regional cooperation and development of a framework to work collaboratively in the future toward the common purpose of honoring this nations veterans.
- I am delighted to recognize the Columbia Lighthouse for the Blind which just last month opened an office and clinic in Silver Spring. Columbia Lighthouse recently received word from the State of Maryland that it would be receiving a \$100,000 grant to assist veterans in our area who have sustained vision loss. **Tony Cancelosi, President and CEO of the Lighthouse is here this morning.**
- Educational opportunities for returning vets are critical to their full re-integration into our community. **I want to thank Montgomery College and its partners for its leadership and awareness of this need and its establishment of the Combat2 College program at its Rockville campus. The program provides academic opportunities, mentoring, disability access to the college, financial guidance and other services to vets returning from the Middle East.**

- A few weeks ago, we broke ground on the new Silver Spring Civic building in downtown Silver Spring. An important feature of this building will be its public plaza which we have designated as Veteran's Plaza. **Thanks to Jack Hewitt and Peter Esker for their advocacy for the plaza.** I look forward to memorable events honoring our veterans taking place in this beautiful new public plaza.

We have taken steps to better assist and honor our community's veterans and to prepare our community as home to the new and expanded military hospital in Bethesda. I look forward to working with all you in assuring that Montgomery County acknowledges the men and women who have served our country.